

The San Jose Mercury News

June 8, 2000

BY PAUL ROGERS

State, U.S. move to end water wars \$10 billion agreement balances needs of bay, delta, farms, cities

Seeking to end decades of battles over water, one of California's most contentious issues, Gov. Gray Davis and U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt have arrived at a fragile, multibillion-dollar truce among farmers, environmentalists and thirsty cities.

The agreement outlines a \$10 billion blueprint for the next 30 years. Its goal: to restore the health of San Francisco Bay and its ecologically struggling delta, the state's largest source of fresh water, while providing a more reliable water source for farms and cities.

The plan does not call for the construction of any major new dams in California, either on rivers or as off-stream reservoirs, according to numerous water experts who have seen preliminary copies of the agreement during meetings in Davis' office this week.

It also abandons the Peripheral Canal, a highly controversial plan rejected by state voters in 1982 to build a 45-mile concrete canal around the eastern end of the delta to more easily move water to Southern California.

Instead, the 50-page summary scheduled to be unveiled at a Sacramento news conference on Friday recommends raising the height of the dam on the state's largest reservoir, Shasta Lake near Redding, by six feet. It calls for enlarging the newly built Los Vaqueros Reservoir in Contra Costa County, and flooding various low-lying islands in the delta to create new storage for billions of gallons of water.

The plan also recommends fixing hundreds of miles of aging levees across Northern California, expanding environmental restoration projects in wetlands and salmon streams, and storing more water in underground aquifers. It would widen conservation and water recycling programs statewide and reform complex laws to allow farmers to more easily sell water to cities.

Perhaps most noteworthy Wednesday, however, was that farmers, environmentalists and urban water managers -- all of whom have spent 30 years in lawsuits against each other -- appeared to be generally in agreement that they will support the plan based on what they know so far.

"It's not perfect. But I am optimistic that there is enough there to keep everybody at the table," said Greg Zlotnick, board chairman of the Santa Clara Valley Water District.

The Santa Clara Valley Water District, which serves 1.7 million people in Silicon Valley, draws 50 percent of its water from the delta.

"This is the milestone that will set the direction for water over the next generation if done right," said Mike Wade, executive director of the California Farm Water Coalition, based in Sacramento.

"We have benefited from the planning and projects of the past. It's time for our generation to prepare for the needs of the future," Wade said.

Environmentalists were pleased the plan does not call for huge new concrete projects, which they argue kill wildlife to provide taxpayer-subsidized water to farmers. Farmers were pleased they won some new storage. And cities said the plan appeared to help improve drinking water quality and reliability.

"There are things we don't like, but this moves the beast forward," said Tom Graff, a senior attorney for Environmental Defense, an Oakland-based environmental group.

"Stepping back from it, I give Gray Davis points for political courage and saying let's move," Graff said. "You can't do something like this without breaking some eggs."

California's water problem is simple. Much of the state is arid. San Jose averages about 14 inches of rain a year, for example, three inches less than Casablanca, Morocco.

Two-thirds of the rain falls in the north. But two-thirds of the people live in the south. From the 1930s to the 1970s, state and federal engineers built the largest system of dams, canals and pumps in the world to move Sierra Nevada snowmelt to Central Valley farms and to cities from San Jose to Los Angeles.

The economy prospered. But the delta suffered.

Delta details

At 738,000 acres, the delta is nearly the size of Yosemite National Park. A network of sloughs, islands, marshes and reclaimed farmland stretching from Sacramento to San Francisco Bay, it was once thick with millions of birds and teeming with salmon. But the delta began to decline in the late 1800s when farmers and city builders diked, drained and filled its wetlands.

Today, the delta still provides a home to more than 54 types of fish, 225 bird species and 52 mammal species.

Yet huge diversions of water -- sucked by pumps near Tracy and sent south in aqueducts -- have driven fish such as the winter-run chinook salmon and delta smelt to the endangered list.

Meanwhile, the delta provides drinking water for 22 million Californians and irrigation for the Central Valley, which produces 45 percent of U.S. fruits and vegetables.

In 1994, after decades of lawsuits, Gov. Pete Wilson and the Clinton administration formed a team of state federal and state agencies known as CalFed to find a solution.

The group, which now includes 18 government agencies, held hundreds of public meetings and conducted countless studies under mountains of paperwork, punctuated with bureaucratic jargon impenetrable to all but the most hardy water lawyers and experts.

Friday's announcement is a summary of CalFed's final environmental impact statement, which is due to be released in July.

Details were still being drafted Wednesday by state and federal officials.

Babbitt's staff did not return calls, and Davis' staff declined comment.

The plan's individual parts require approval from Congress and the state Legislature. Funding will come from tax money, user fees and bond acts, such as the \$1.9 billion water bond, Proposition 13, passed by California voters in March.

About the agreement

According to sources familiar with the plan, it includes:

Storage: Providing roughly 1 million acre-feet of new water storage in four projects, the plan would enlarge Shasta and Los Vaqueros reservoirs and flood low-lying delta islands protected by levees. It would draw water from canals in dry years before it flowed into San Luis Reservoir near Los Banos, a lake that cannot be completely drained because of water quality problems at low levels. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons, enough for a family of four for two years.

Environment: Already, CalFed has spent about \$220 million in state and federal money removing small dams, installing fish screens on pumps and restoring wetlands. That work would continue. The plan would set up an "environmental water bank" of about 380,000 acre-feet. Government officials would buy water and set it aside for fish in dry years.

Guarantees: Farmers support a provision that would establish a "no surprises" policy for endangered species. Under the plan, farmers and cities would be guaranteed certain levels of water, even if new fish or other species are added to the endangered list that otherwise could limit their pumping.

Transfers: The plan seeks to reform rules to make it easier for cities to buy water from farmers volunteering to sell it. Farmers use 79 percent of California's water.

Water quality and conservation: The plan calls for new efforts to clean up abandoned mines that pollute streams, and to offer incentives for farmers and cities to reduce runoff from pesticides, fertilizer and other toxins. It directs governments to provide rebates for low-flush toilets and low-flow shower heads, as well as drip irrigation on crops, to conserve water.

Jason Peltier, manager of the Central Valley Project Water Association, said that farmers wanted more limits on the power of federal agencies to reduce water flows because of endangered species. But he said farmers will be pleased that there is some new storage. Davis and Babbitt appear to have found a way to increase storage without drawing mass ire from environmentalists.

"Certainly there's going to be some grumbling," Peltier said. "But this does move the ball down field. It sets us on a good course to improve our water supply and quality."